



"I have been here before,
But when, or how, I cannot tell!"
ROSSETTI.

I.

TUESDAY NIGHT,
November 3rd.

THEORIES! What is the good of theories? They are the scourges that lash our minds in modern days, lash them into confusion, perplexity, despair. I have never been troubled by them before. Why should I be troubled by them now? And the absurdity of Professor Black's is surely obvious. A child would laugh at it. Yes, a child! I have never been a diary writer. I have never been able to understand the amusement of sitting down late at night and scrawling minutely in some hidden book every paltry incident of one's paltry days. People say it is so interesting to read the entries years afterwards. To read, as a man, the *menu* that I ate through as a boy, the love story that I was actor in, the tragedy that I brought about, the debt that I have never paid,—how could it profit me? To keep a diary has always seemed to me merely an addition to the ills of life. Yet now I have a hidden book, like the rest of the world, and I am scrawling in it to-day. Yes, but for a reason.

I want to make things clear to myself, and I find, as others, that my mind works more easily with the assistance of the pen. The actual tracing of words on paper dispels the clouds that cluster round my thoughts. I shall recall events to set my mind at ease, to prove to myself how absurd a man who could believe in Professor Black would be. "Little Dry-as-dust" I used to call him. Dry? He is full of wild romance, rubbish that a school-girl would be ashamed to believe in. Yet he is abnormally clever: his record proves that. Still, clever men are the first to be led astray, they say. It is the searcher who follows the wandering light. What he says can't be true. When I have filled these pages, and read what I have written dispassionately, as one of the outside public might read, I shall have done, once for all, with the ridiculous fancies that are beginning to make my life a burden. To put my thoughts in order will make a music. The evil spirit within me will sleep, will die. I shall be cured. It must be so—it shall be so.

To go back to the beginning. Ah! what a long time ago that seems! As a child I was cruel. Most boys are cruel, I think. My school companions were a merciless set—merciless to one another, to their masters when they had a chance, to animals, to birds. The desire to torture was in nearly all of them. They loved to bully, and if they bullied only mildly, it was from fear, not from love. They did not wish their boomerang to return and slay them. If a boy were deformed they twitted him. If a master were kind, or gentle, or shy, they made his life as intolerable as they could. If an animal or a bird came into their power they had no pity. I was like the rest. Indeed, I think that I was worse. Cruelty is horrible. I have enough imagination to do more than know that—to feel it.

Some say that it is lack of imagination which makes men and women brutes. May it not be power of imagination? The interest of torturing is lessened, is almost lost, if we cannot be the tortured as well as the torturer.

As a child I was cruel by nature, by instinct. I was a handsome, well-bred, gentlemanlike, gentle-looking little brute. My parents adored me, and I was good to them. They were so kind to me that I was almost fond of them. Why not? It seemed to me as politic to be fond of them as of any one else. I did what I pleased, but I did not always let them know it; so I pleased them. The wise child will take care to foster the ignorance of its parents. My people were pretty well off, and I was their only child; but my chief chances of future pleasure in life were centred in my grandmother, my mother's mother. She was immensely rich, and she lived here. This room in which I am writing now was her favourite sitting-room. On that hearth, before a log fire, such as is burning at this moment, used to sit that wonderful cat of hers—that horrible cat! Why did I ever play my childish cards to win this house, this place? Sometimes, lately—very lately only—I have wondered, like a fool perhaps. Yet would Professor Black say so? I remember, as a boy of sixteen, paying my last visit here to my grandmother. It bored me very much to come. But she was said to be near death, and death leaves great houses vacant for others to fill. So when my mother said that I had better come, and my father added that he thought my grandmother was fonder of me than of my other relations, I gave up all my boyish plans for the holidays with apparent willingness. Though almost a child, I was not short-sighted. I knew every boy had a future as well as a present. I gave up my plans and came here with a smile, but in my heart I hated my grandmother for having power, and so bending me to relinquish pleasure for boredom. I hated her, and I came to her and kissed her, and saw her beautiful white Persian cat sitting before the fire in this room, and thought of the fellow who was my bosom friend, and with whom I longed to be, shooting, or fishing, or riding. And I

looked at the cat again. I remember it began to purr when I went near to it. It sat quite still, with its blue eyes fixed upon the fire, but when I approached it I heard it purr complacently. I longed to kick it. The limitations of its ridiculous life satisfied it completely. It seemed to reproduce in an absurd, diminished way, my grandmother, in her white lace cap, with her white face and hands. She sat in her chair all day and looked at the fire. The cat sat on the hearthrug and did the same. The cat seemed to me the animal personification of the human who kept me chained from all the sports and pleasures I had promised myself for the holidays. When I went near to the cat and heard it calmly purring at me I longed to do it an injury. It seemed to me as if it understood what my grandmother did not, and was complacently triumphing at my voluntary imprisonment with age, and laughing to itself at the pains men—and boys—will undergo for the sake of money. Brute! I did not love my grandmother, and she had money. I hated the cat utterly. It hadn't a *sou*!

This beautiful house is not old. My grandfather built it himself. He had no love for the life of towns, I believe, but was passionately in touch with nature, and, when a young man, he set out on a strange tour through England. His object was to find a perfect view, and in front of that view he intended to build himself a habitation. For nearly a year, so I have been told, he wandered through Scotland and England, and at last he came to this place in Cumberland, to this village, to this very spot. Here his wanderings ceased. Standing on the terrace—then uncultivated forest—that runs in front of these windows, he found at last what he desired. He bought the forest. He bought the windings of the river, the fields upon its banks, and on the extreme edge of the steep gorge through which it runs he built the lovely dwelling that to-day is mine.

This place is no ordinary place. It is characteristic in the highest degree. The house is wonderfully situated, with the ground falling abruptly in front of it, the river forming almost a horseshoe round it. The woods are lovely. The garden, curiously, almost wildly laid out, is like no other garden I ever saw. And the house, though not old, is full of little surprises, curiously-shaped rooms, remarkable staircases, quaint recesses. The place is a place to remember. The house is a house to fix itself in the memory. Nothing that had once lived here could ever come back and forget that it had been here. Not even an animal,—not even an animal!

I wish I had never gone to that dinner party and met the Professor. There was a horror coming upon me then. He has hastened its steps. He has put my fears into shape, my vague wondering into words. Why cannot men leave life alone? Why will they catch it by the throat and wring its secrets from it? To respect reserve is one of the first instincts of the gentleman; and life is full of reserve.

It is getting very late. I thought I heard a step in the house just now. I wonder—I wonder if *she* is asleep. I wish I knew.

Day after day passed by. My grandmother seemed to be failing, but almost imperceptibly. She evidently loved to have me near to her. Like most old dying people, in her mind she frantically clutched at life, that could give to her nothing more; and I believe she grew to regard me as the personification of all that was leaving her. My vitality warmed her. She extended her hands to my flaming hearthfire. She seemed trying to live in my life, and at length became afraid to let me out of her sight. One day she said to me, in her quavering, ugly voice,—old voices are so ugly, like hideous echoes,—

“Ronald, I could never die while you were in the room. So long as you are with me, where I can touch you, I shall live.”



"'Ronald, I could never die while you were in the room.'"

And she put out her white, corrugated hand, and fondled my warm boy's hand.

How I longed to push her hand away, and get out into the sunlight and the air, and hear young voices, the voices of the morning, not of the twilight, and be away from wrinkled Death, that seemed sitting on the doorstep of that house huddled up like a beggar, waiting for the door to be opened!

I was bored till I grew malignant. I confess it. And, feeling malignant, I

began to long more and more passionately to vent myself on some one or something. I looked at the cat, which, as usual, was sitting before the fire.

Animals have intuitions as keen as those of a woman, keener than those of a man. They inherit an instinct of fear of those who hate them from a long line of ancestors who have suffered at the hands of cruel men. They can tell by a look, by a motion, by the tone of a voice, whether to expect from any one kindness or malignity. The cat had purred complacently on the first day of my arrival, and had hunched up her white, furry back towards my hand, and had smiled with her calm, light blue eyes. Now, when I approached her, she seemed to gather herself together and to make herself small. She shrank from me. There was—as I fancied—a dawning comprehension, a dawning terror in her blue eyes. She always sat very close to my grandmother now, as if she sought protection, and she watched me as if she were watching for an intention which she apprehended to grow in my mind.

And the intention came.

For, as the days went on, and my grandmother still lived, I began to grow desperate. My holiday time was over now, but my parents wrote telling me to stay where I was, and not to think of returning to school. My grandmother had caused a letter to be sent to them in which she said that she could not part from me, and added that my parents would never have cause to regret interrupting my education for a time. "He will be paid in full for every moment he loses," she wrote, referring to me.

It seemed a strange taste in her to care so much for a boy, but she had never loved women, and I was handsome, and she liked handsome faces. The brutality in my nature was not written upon my features. I had smiling, frank brown eyes, a lithe young figure, a gay boy's voice. My movements were quick, and I have always been told that my gestures were never awkward, my demeanour was never unfinished, as is the case so often with lads at school. Outwardly I was attractive; and the old woman, who had married two husbands merely for their looks, delighted in feeling that she had the power to retain me by her side at an age when most boys avoid old people as if they were the pestilence.

And then I pretended to love her, and obeyed all her insufferably tiresome behests. But I longed to wreak vengeance upon her all the same. My dearest friend, the fellow with whom I was to have spent my holidays, was leaving at the end of this term which I was missing. He wrote to me furious letters, urging me to come back, and reproaching me for my selfishness and lack of affection.

Each time I received one I looked at the cat, and the cat shrank nearer to my grandmother's chair.

It never purred now, and nothing would induce it to leave the room where she sat. One day the servant said to me,—

"I believe the poor dumb thing knows my mistress can't last very much longer, sir. The way that cat looks up at her goes to my heart. Ah! them beasts understand things as well as we do, I believe."

I think the cat understood quite well. It did watch my grandmother in a very strange way, gazing up into her face, as if to mark the changing contours, the increasing lines, the down-droop of the features, that bespoke the gradual soft approach of death. It listened to the sound of her voice; and as, each day, the voice grew more vague, more weak and toneless, an anxiety that made me exult dawned and deepened in its blue eyes. Or so I thought.

I had a great deal of morbid imagination at that age, and loved to weave a web of fancies, mostly horrible, around almost everything that entered into my life. It

pleased me to believe that the cat understood each new intention that came into my mind, read me silently from its place near the fire, tracked my thoughts, and was terror-stricken as they concentrated themselves round a definite resolve, which hardened and toughened day by day.

It pleased me to believe, do I say? I did really believe, and do believe now, that the cat understood all, and grew haggard with fear as my grandmother failed visibly. For it knew what the end would mean for it.

That first day of my arrival, when I saw my grandmother in her white cap, with her white face and hands, and the big white cat sitting near to her, I had thought there was a similarity between them. That similarity struck me more forcibly, grew upon me, as my time in the house grew longer, until the latter seemed almost a reproduction of the former, and after each letter from my friend my hate for the two increased. But my hate for my grandmother was impotent, and would always be so. I could never repay her for the *ennui*, the furious, forced inactivity which made my life a burden, and spurred my bad passions while they lulled me in a terrible, enforced repose. I could repay her favourite, the thing she had always cherished, her feline confidant, who lived in safety under the shadow of her protection. I could wreak my fury on that when the protection was withdrawn, as it must be at last. It seemed to my brutal, imaginative, unfinished boy's mind that the murder of her pet must hurt and wound my grandmother even after she was dead. I would make her suffer then, when she was impotent to wreak a vengeance upon me. I would kill the cat.

The creature knew my resolve the day I made it, and had even, I should say, anticipated it.

As I sat day after day beside my grandmother's armchair in the dim room, with the blinds drawn to shut out the summer sunlight, and talked to her in a subdued and reverent voice, agreeing with all the old banalities she uttered, all the preposterous opinions she propounded, all the commands she laid upon me, I gazed beyond her at the cat, and the creature was haggard with apprehension.

It knew, as I knew, that its day was coming. Sometimes I bent down and took it up on my lap to please my grandmother, and praised its beauty and its gentleness to her. And all the time I felt its warm, furry body trembling with horror between my hands. This pleased me, and I pretended that I was never happy unless it was on my knees. I kept it there for hours, stroking it so tenderly, smoothing its thick white coat, which was always in the most perfect order, talking to it, caressing it.

And sometimes I took its head between my two hands, turned its face to mine, and stared into its large blue eyes. Then I could read all its agony, all its torture of apprehension; and in spite of my friend's letters, and the dulness of my days, I was almost happy.

The summer was deepening, the glow of the roses flushed the garden ways, the skies were clear above Scawfell, when the end at last drew near. My grandmother's face was now scarcely recognisable. The eyes were sunk deep in her head. All expression seemed to fade gradually away. Her cheeks were no longer fine ivory white: a dull, sickening, yellow pallor overspread them. She seldom looked at me now, but rested entombed in her great armchair, her shrunken limbs seeming to tend downwards, as if she were inclined to slide to the floor and die there. Her lips were thin and dry, and moved perpetually in a silent chattering, as if her mind were talking and her voice were already dead. The tide of life was retreating from her body. I could almost see it visibly ebb away. The failing waves made no sound upon the shore. Death is uncanny, like all silent things.

Her maid wished her to stay entirely in bed, but she would get up, muttering that she was well; and the doctor said it was useless to hinder her. She had no specific disease. Only the years were taking their last toll of her. So she was placed in her chair each day by the fire, and sat there till evening, muttering with those dry lips. The stiff folds of her silken skirts formed an angle, and there the cat crouched hour after hour, a silent, white, waiting thing.

And the waves ebbed and ebbed away, and I waited too.

One afternoon, as I sat by my grandmother, the servant entered with a letter for me just arrived by the post. I took it up. It was from Willoughby, my school-friend. He said the term was over, that he had left school, and his father had decided to send him out to America to start in business in New York, instead of entering him at Oxford as he had hoped. He bade me good-bye, and said he supposed we should not meet again for years; "but," he added, "no doubt you won't care a straw, so long as you get the confounded money you're after. You've taught me one of the lessons of life, young Ronald,—never to believe in friendship."

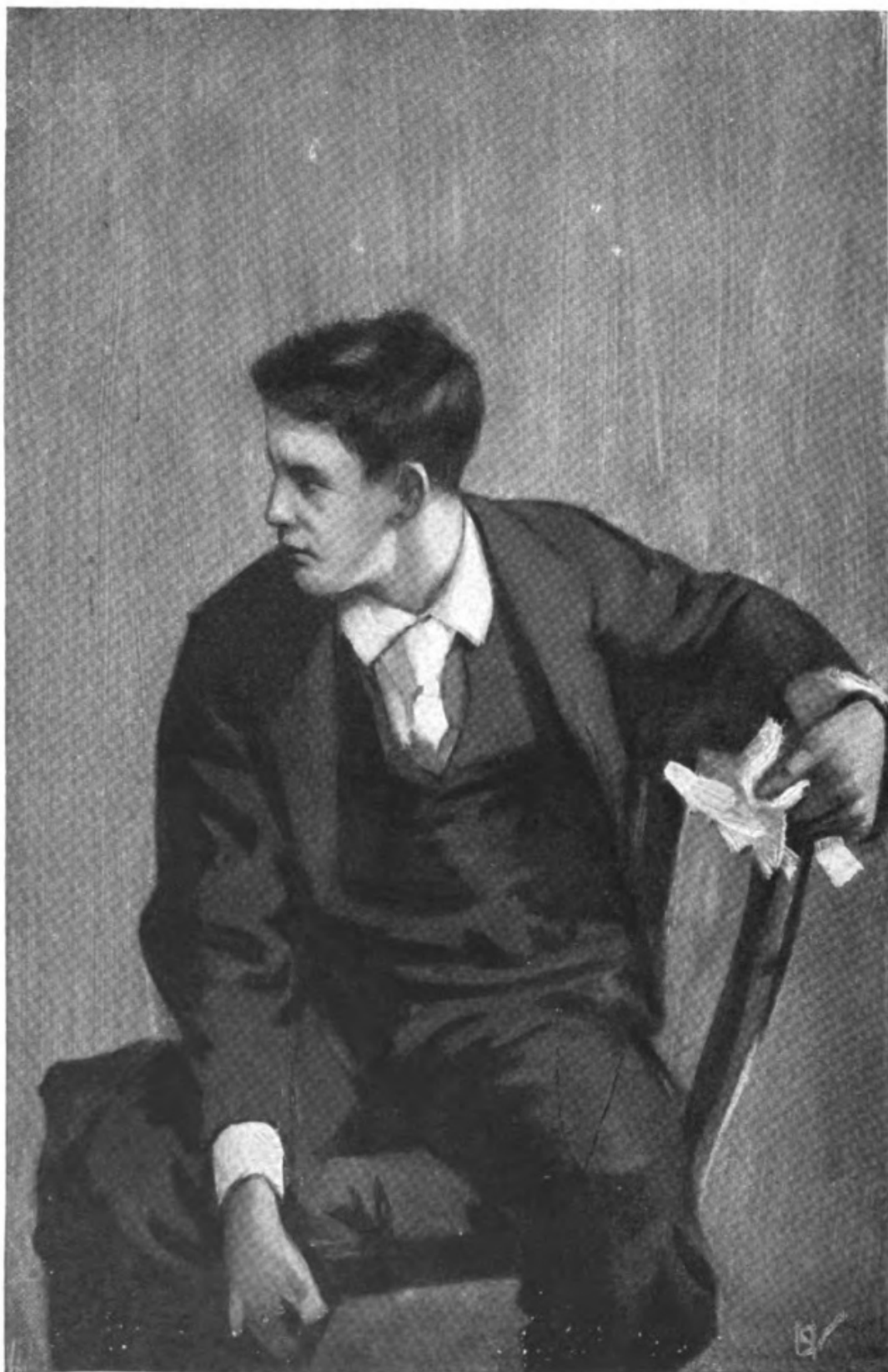
As I read the letter I set my teeth. All that was good in my nature centred round Willoughby. He was a really fine fellow. I honestly and truly loved him. His news gave me a bitter shock, and turned my heart to iron and to fire. Perhaps I should never see him again; even if I did, time would have changed him, seared him,—my friend, in his wonderful youth, with the morning in his eyes, would be no more. I hated myself in that moment for having stayed; I hated still more her who had kept me. For the moment I was carried out of myself. I crushed the letter up in my burning hand. I turned fiercely round upon that yellow, enigmatic, dying figure in the great chair. All the fury, locked within my heart for so long, rose to the surface, and drove self-interest away. I turned upon my grandmother with blazing eyes and trembling limbs. I opened my mouth to utter a torrent of reproachful words, when—what was it?—what slight change had stolen into the wrinkled, yellow face? I bent over her. The eyes gazed at me, but so horribly! She sat so low in her chair; she looked so fearful, so very strange! I put my fingers on her eyelids,—I drew them down over the eyeballs: they did not open again. I felt her bony hands: they were ice. Then I knew, and I felt myself smiling. I leaned over the dead woman. There, on the far side of her, crouched the cat. Its white fur was all bristling; its blue eyes were dilated; on its jaws there were flecks of foam.

I leaned over the dead woman and took it in my arms.

* * * * *

That was nearly twenty years ago, and yet to-night the memory of that moment, and what followed it, bring a fear to my heart which I must combat. I have read of men who lived for long spaces of time haunted by demons created by their imagination, and I have laughed at them and pitied them. Surely I am not going to join in their folly, in their madness, led to the gates of terror by my own fancies, half confirmed, apparently, by the chance utterances of a conceited Professor—a man of fads although a man of science.

That was twenty years ago. After to-night let me forget it. After to-night, do I say? Hark! the birds are twittering in the dew outside. The pale, early sun-shafts strike over the moors. And I am tired. To-morrow night I will finish this wrestle with my own folly; I will give the *coup de grâce* to my imagination. But no more now. My brain is not calm, and I will not write in excitement.



"I crushed the letter up."

514

II.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT,
November 4th.

MARGOT has gone to bed at last, and I am alone. This has been a horrible day—horrible; but I will not dwell upon it.

After the death of my grandmother I went back to school again. But Willoughby was gone, and he could not forgive me. He wrote to me once or twice from New York, and then I ceased to hear from him. He died out of my life. His affection for me had evidently declined from the day when he took it into his head that I was only a money-grubber, like the rest of the world, and that the Jew instinct had developed in me at an abnormally early age. I let him go. What did it matter? But I was always glad that I had been cruel on the day my grandmother died. I never repented of what I did—never. If I had, I might be happier now.

I went back to school. I studied, played, got into mischief and out of it again, like other boys; but in my life there seemed to be an eternal coldness, that I alone, perhaps, was conscious of. My deed of cruelty, of brutal revenge on the thing that had never done me injury, had seared my soul. I was not sorry, but I could not forget; and sometimes I thought—how ridiculous it looks written down!—that there was a power hidden somewhere which could not forget either, and that a penalty might have to be paid. Because a creature is dumb, must its soul die when it dies? Is not the soul, perhaps—as *he* said—a wanderer through many bodies?

But if I did not kill a soul, as I killed a body, the day my grandmother died, where is that soul now? That is what I want to arrive at,—that is what I must arrive at, if I am to be happy.

I went back to school, and I passed to Oxford. I tasted the strange, unique life of a university, narrow, yet pulsating, where the youth, that is so green and springing, tries to arm itself for the battle with the weapons forged by the dead and sharpened by the more elderly among the living. I did well there, and I passed on into the world. And then at last I began to understand the value of my inheritance; for all that had been my grandmother's was now mine. My people wished me to marry, but I had no desire to fetter myself. So I took the sponge in my strong young hands, and tried to squeeze it dry. And I did not know that I was sad,—I did not know it until, at the age of thirty-three, just seventeen years after my grandmother died, I understood the sort of thing happiness is. Of course it was love that brought to me understanding. I need not explain that. I had often played on love; now love began to play on me. I trembled at the harmonies his hands evoked.

I met a young girl, very young, just on the verge of life and of womanhood. She was seventeen when I first saw her, and she was valseing at a big ball in London,—her first ball. She passed me in the crowd of dancers, and I noticed her. As she was a *débutante*, her dress was naturally snow-white. There was no touch of colour about it—not a flower, not a jewel. Her hair was the palest yellow I had almost ever seen—the colour of an early primrose. Naturally fluffy, it nearly concealed the white riband that ran through it, and clustered in tendrils and tiny natural curls upon her neck. Her skin was whiter than ivory—a clear, luminous white. Her eyes were very large, and china-blue in colour.

This young girl dancing passed and repassed me, and my glance rested on her idly, even cynically. For she seemed so happy, and at that time happiness won

my languid wonder, if ingenuously exhibited. To be happy seemed almost to be mindless. But by degrees I found myself watching this girl, and more closely. Another dance began. She joined it with another partner. But she seemed just as pleased with him as with her former one. She would not let him pause to rest; she kept him dancing all the time,—her youth and freshness spoken in that gentle compelling. I grew interested in her, even acutely so. She seemed to me like the spirit of youth dancing over the body of Time. I resolved to know her. I felt weary: I thought she might revive me. The dance drew to an end, and I approached my hostess, pointed the girl out, and asked for an introduction. Her name was Margot Magendie, I found, and she was an heiress as well as a beauty.

I did not care: it was her humanity that drew me, nothing else.

But, strange to say, when the moment for the introduction arrived, and I stood face to face with Miss Magendie, I felt an extraordinary shrinking from her. I have never been able to understand it, but my blood ran cold, and my pulses almost ceased to beat. I would have avoided her: an instinct within me seemed suddenly to cry out against her. But it was too late: the introduction was effected; her hand rested on my arm.

I was actually trembling. She did not appear to notice it. The band played a valse, and the inexplicable horror that had seized me lost itself in the gay music. It never returned until lately.

I seldom enjoyed a valse more. Our steps suited so perfectly, and her obvious childish pleasure communicated itself to me. The spirit of youth in her knocked on my rather jaded heart, and I opened to it. That was beautiful and strange. I talked with her, and I felt myself younger, ingenuous rather than cynical, inclined even to a radiant—though foolish—optimism. She was very natural, very imperfect in worldly education, full of fragmentary but decisive views on life, quite unabashed in giving them forth, quite inconsiderate in summoning my adherence to them.

And then, presently, as we sat in a dim corridor under a rosy hanging lamp, in saying something she looked, with her great blue eyes, right into my face. Some very faint recollection awoke and stirred in my mind.

"Surely," I said hesitatingly, "surely I have seen you before? It seems to me that I remember your eyes."

As I spoke I was thinking hard, chasing the vagrant recollection that eluded me.

She smiled. "You don't remember my face?"

"No, not at all."

"Nor I yours. If we had seen each other surely we should recollect it."

Then she blushed, suddenly realising that her words implied, perhaps, more than she had meant. I did not pay the obvious compliment. Those blue eyes and something in their expression moved me strangely; but I could not tell why. When I said good-bye to her that night I asked to be allowed to call.

She assented.

That was the beginning of a very beautiful courtship, which gave a colour to life, a music to existence, a meaning to every slightest sensation.

And was it love that laid to sleep recollection, that sang a lullaby to awakening horror, and strewed poppies over it till it sighed itself into slumber? Was it love that drowned my mind in deep and charmed waters, binding the strange powers that every mind possesses in flowery garlands stronger than any fetters of iron? Was it love that, calling up dreams, alienated my thoughts from their search after reality?

I hardly know. I only know that I grew to love Margot, and only looked for love in her blue eyes, not for any deed of the past that might be mirrored there.

And I made her love me.



"As we sat in a dim corridor."

She gave her child's heart to my keeping with a perfect confidence that only a perfect affection could engender. She did love me then. No circumstances of to-day can break that fact under their hammers. She did love me, and it is the knowledge that she did which gives so much of fear to me now.

For great changes in the human mind are terrible. As we realise them we realise the limitless possibilities of sinister deeds that lie hidden in every human being. A little child that loves a doll can become an old, crafty, secret murderer. How horrible!

And perhaps it is still more horrible to think that, while the human envelope remains totally unchanged, every word of the letter within may become altered, and a message of peace fade into a sentence of death.

Margot's face is the same face now as it was when I married her—scarcely older, certainly not less beautiful. Only the expression of the eyes has changed.

For we were married. After a year of love-making, which never tired either of us, we elected to bind ourselves, to fuse the two into one.

We went abroad for the honeymoon, and, instead of shortening it to the fashionable fortnight, we travelled for nearly six months, and were happy all the time.

Boredom never set in. Margot had a beautiful mind as well as a beautiful face. She softened me through my affection. The current of my life began to set in a different direction. I turned the pages of a book of pity and of death more beautiful than that of *Pierre Loti*. I could hear at last the great cry for sympathy, which is the music of this strange suffering world, and, listening to it, in my heart there rang an echo. The cruelty in my nature seemed to shrivel up. I was more gentle than I had been, more gentle than I had thought I could ever be.

At last, in the late spring, we started for home. We stayed for a week in London, and then we travelled north. Margot had never seen her future home, had never even been in Cumberland before. She was full of excitement and happiness, a veritable child in the ready and ardent expression of her feelings. The station is several miles from the house, and is on the edge of the sea. When the train pulled up at the wayside platform the day drew towards sunset, and the flat levels of the beach shone with a rich, liquid, amber light. In the distance the sea was tossing and tumbling, whipped into foam by a fresh wind. The Isle of Man lay far away, dark, mysterious, under a stack of bellying white clouds, just beginning to be tinged with the faintest rose.

Margot found the scene beautiful, the wind life-giving, the flat sand-banks, the shining levels, even the dry, spiky grass that fluttered in the breeze, fascinating and refreshing.

"I feel near the heart of nature in a place like this," she said, looking up at a seagull that hovered over the little platform, crying to the wind on which it hung.

The train stole off along the edge of the sands, till we could see only the white streamer of its smoke trailing towards the sun. We turned away from the sea, got into the carriage that was waiting for us, and set our faces inland. The ocean was blotted out by the low grass and heather-covered banks that divided the fields. Presently we plunged into woods. The road descended sharply. A village, an abruptly winding river, sprang into sight.

We were on my land. We passed the inn, the Rainwood Arms, named after my grandfather's family. The people whom we met stared curiously and saluted in rustic fashion.

Margot was full of excitement and pleasure, and talked incessantly, holding my hand tightly in hers and asking a thousand questions. Passing through the village, we mounted a hill towards a thick grove of trees.

"The house stands among them," I said, pointing.

She sprang up eagerly in the carriage to find it, but it was hidden.

We dashed through the gate into the momentary darkness of the drive, emerged between great green lawns, and drew up before the big doorway of the hall. I looked into her eyes and said, "Welcome!"

She only smiled in answer.

I would not let her enter the house immediately, but made her come with me to the terrace above the river, to see the view over the Cumbrian mountains and the moors of Eskdale.

The sky was very clear and pale, but over Styhead the clouds were boiling up. The Screes that guard ebon Wastwater looked grim and sad.

Margot stood beside me on the terrace, but her chatter had been succeeded by silence. And I too was silent for the moment, absorbed in contemplation. But presently I turned to her, wishing to see how she was impressed by her new domain.

She was not looking towards the river and the hills, but at the terrace walk itself, the band of emerald turf that bordered it, the stone pots full of flowers, the winding way that led into the shrubbery.

She was looking at these intently, and with a strangely puzzled, almost startled expression.

"Hush! Don't speak to me for a moment," she said, as I opened my lips. "Don't: I want to— How odd this is!"

And she gazed up at the windows of the house, at the creepers that climbed its walls, at the sloping roof and the irregular chimney-stacks.

Her lips were slightly parted, and her eyes were full of an inward expression that told me she was struggling with forgetfulness and desired recollection.

I was silent, wondering.

At last she said, "Ronald, I have never been in the north of England before, never set foot in Cumberland; yet I seem to know this terrace walk, those very flower-pots, the garden, the look of that roof, those chimneys, even the slanting way in which that great creeper climbs. Is it not—is it not very strange?"

She gazed up at me, and in her blue eyes there was an expression almost of fear.

I smiled down on her. "It must be your fancy," I said.

"It does not seem so," she replied. "I feel as if I had been here before, and often, or for a long time." She paused; then she said, "Do let me go into the house. There ought to be a room there—a room—I seem almost to see it. Come! Let us go in."

She took my hand and drew me towards the hall door. The servants were carrying in the luggage, and there was a certain amount of confusion and noise, but she did not seem to notice it. She was intent on something: I could not tell what.

"Do show me the house, Ronald—the drawing-room, and—and—there is another room I wish to see."

"You shall see them all, dear," I said. "You are excited. It is natural enough. This is the drawing-room."

She glanced round it hastily.

"And now the others!" she exclaimed.

I took her to the dining-room, the library, and the various apartments on the ground floor.

She scarcely looked at them. When we had finished exploring, "Are these all?" she asked, with a wavering accent of disappointment.

"All," I answered.

"Then—show me the rooms upstairs."

We ascended the shallow oak steps, and passed first into the apartment in which my grandmother had died.

It had been done up since then, refurnished, and almost completely altered. Only the wide fireplace, with its brass dogs and its heavy oaken mantelpiece, had been left untouched.

Margot glanced hastily round. Then she walked up to the fireplace, and drew a long breath.

"There ought to be a fire here," she said.

"But it is summer," I answered, wondering.



"'Ronald, I don't think I like this room. There is something—I don't know— . . .'"

"And a chair there," she went on, in a curious low voice, indicating—I think now, or is it my imagination?—the very spot where my grandmother was wont to sit. "Yes—I seem to remember, and yet not to remember."

She looked at me, and her white brows were knit.

Suddenly she said: "Ronald, I don't think I like this room. There is something—I don't know—I don't think I could sit here; and I seem to remember—something about it, as I did about the terrace. What can it mean?"

"It means that you are tired and over-excited, darling. Your nerves are too highly strung, and nerves play us strange tricks. Come to your own room and take off your things, and when you have had some tea you will be all right again.

Yes, I was fool enough to believe that tea was the panacea for an undreamed-of, a then unimaginable, evil.

I thought Margot was simply an overtired and imaginative child that evening. If I could believe so now!

We went up into her boudoir and had tea, and she grew more like herself; but several times that night I observed her looking puzzled and thoughtful, and a certain expression of anxiety shone in her blue eyes that was new to them then.

But I thought nothing of it, and I was happy. Two or three days passed, and Margot did not again refer to her curious sensation of pre-knowledge of the house and garden. I fancied there was a slight alteration in her manner: that was all. She seemed a little restless. Her vivacity flagged now and then. She was more willing to be alone than she had been. But we were old married folk now, and could not be always in each other's sight. I had a great many people connected with the estate to see, and had to gather up the tangled threads of many affairs.

The honeymoon was over. Of course we could not always be together.

Still I should have wished Margot to desire it, and I could not hide from myself that now and then she scarcely concealed a slight impatience to be left in solitude. This troubled me, but only a little, for she was generally as fond as ever. That evening, however, an incident occurred which rendered me decidedly uneasy, and made me wonder if my wife were not inclined to that curse of highly strung women—hysteria!

I had been out riding over the moors, to visit a tenant farmer who lived at some distance, and did not return until twilight. Dismounting, I let myself into the house, traversed the hall and ascended the stairs. As I wore spurs, and the steps were of polished oak and uncarpeted, I walked noisily enough to warn any one of my approach. I was passing the door of the room that had been my grandmother's sitting-room, when I noticed that it stood open. It was rather dark, and the interior was dim enough, but I could see a figure in a white dress moving about inside. I recognised Margot and wondered what she was doing, but her movements were so singular that instead of speaking to her I stood in the doorway and watched her.

She was walking, with a very peculiar, stealthy step, around the room, not as if she were looking for anything, but merely as if she were restless or ill at ease. But what struck me forcibly was this, that there was something curiously animal in her movements, seen thus in a dim half light that only partially revealed her to me. I had never seen a woman walk in that strangely wild, yet soft, way before. There was something uncanny about it, that rendered me extremely discomforted; yet I was quite fascinated, and rooted to the ground.

I cannot tell how long I stood there. I was so completely absorbed in the passion of the gazer that the passage of time did not concern me in the least. I was as one assisting at a strange spectacle. This white thing moving in the dark did not suggest my wife to me, although it was she. I might have been watching an animal, vague yet purposeful of mind, tracing out some hidden thing, following out some instinct quite foreign to humanity. I remember that presently I involuntarily clasped my hands together, and felt that they were very cold. Perspiration broke out on my face. I was painfully, unnaturally moved, and a violent desire to be away from this white moving thing came over me. Walking as softly as I could, I went to my dressing-room, shut the door, and sat down on a chair. I never



"She had told me a lie."

remember to have felt thoroughly unnerved before, but now I found myself actually shaken, palsied. I could understand how deadly a thing fear is. I lit a candle hastily, and as I did so a knock came to the door.

Margot's voice said, "May I come in?"

I felt unable to reply, so I got up and admitted her.

She entered smiling, and looking such a child, so innocent, so tender, that I almost laughed aloud. That I, a man, should have been frightened by a child in a white dress, just because the twilight cast a phantom atmosphere around her! I held her in my arms and I gazed into her blue eyes.

She looked down, but still smiled.

"Where have you been, and what have you been doing?" I asked gaily.

She answered that she had been in the drawing-room since tea-time.

"You came here straight from the drawing-room?" I said.

She replied, "Yes."

Then, with an indifferent air which hid real anxiety, I said, "By the way, Margot, have you been into that room again? The room you fancied you recollected?"

"No, never," she answered, withdrawing herself from my arms. "I don't wish to go there. Make haste, Ronald, and dress. It is nearly dinner-time, and I am ready." And she turned and left me.

She had told me a lie. All my feelings of uneasiness and discomfort returned tenfold.

That evening was the most wretched one, the only wretched one, I had ever spent with her.

* * * * *

I am tired of writing. I will continue my task to-morrow. It takes me longer than I anticipated. Yet even to tell everything to myself brings me some comfort. Man must express himself; and despair must find a voice.

III.

THURSDAY NIGHT,
November 5th.

THAT lie awoke in me suspicion of the child I had married. I began to doubt her, yet never ceased to love her. She had all my heart, and must have it till the end. But the calm of love was to be succeeded by love's tumult and agony. A strangeness was creeping over Margot. It was as if she took a thin veil in her hands, and drew it over and all around her, till the outlines I had known were slightly blurred. Her disposition, which had been so clear cut, so sharply, beautifully defined, standing out in its innocent glory for all men to see, seemed to withdraw itself, as if a dawning necessity for secrecy had arisen. A thin crust of reserve began to subtly overspread her every act and expression. She thought now before she spoke; she thought before she looked. It seemed to me that she was becoming a slightly different person.

The change I mean to imply is very difficult to describe. It was not abrupt enough to startle, but I could feel it, slight though it was. Have you seen the first flat film of waveless water, sent by the incoming tides of the sea, crawling silently up over the wrinkled brown sand, and filling the tiny ruts, till diminutive hills and valleys are all one smooth surface? So it was with Margot. A tide flowed over her character, a waveless tide of reserve. The hills and valleys which I loved disappeared from my ken. Behind the old sweet smile, the old frank expression, my wife was shrinking down to hide herself, as one escaping from pursuit hides behind a barrier. When one human being knows another very intimately, and all the barricades that divide soul from soul have been broken down, it is difficult to set them up again without noise and dust, and the sound of thrust-in bolts, and the tap of the hammer that drives in the nails. It is difficult, but not impossible. Barricades can be raised noiselessly, soundless bolts—that keep out the soul—be pushed home. The black gauze veil that blots out the scene drops, and when it is raised—if ever—the scene is changed.

The real Margot was receding from me. I felt it with an impotence of despair that was benumbing. Yet I could not speak of it, for at first I could hardly tell if she knew of what was taking place. Indeed, at this moment, in thinking it over, I do not believe that for some time she had any definite cognisance of the fact that she was growing to love me less passionately than of old. In acts she was not changed. That was the strange part of the matter. Her kisses were warm, but I believed them premeditated. She clasped my hand in hers, but now there was more mechanism than magic in that act of tenderness. Impulse failed within her; and she had been all impulse. Did she know it? At that time I wondered. Believing that she did not know she was changing, I was at the greatest pains to guard my conduct, lest I should implant the suspicion that might hasten what I feared. I remained, desperately, the same as ever, and so of course was not the same, for a deed done defiantly bears little resemblance to a deed done naturally. I was always considering what I should say, how I should act, even how I should look. To live now was sedulous instead of easy. Effort took the place of simplicity. My wife and I were gazing furtively at each other through the eye-holes of masks. I knew it. Did she?

At that time I never ceased to wonder. Of one thing I was certain, however—that Margot began to devise excuses for being left alone. When we first came home



"I thought I caught her gaze fixed fearfully upon me."

she could hardly endure me out of her sight. Now she grew to appreciate solitude. This was a terrible danger-signal, and I could not fail to so regard it.

Yet something within me held me back from speaking out. I made no comment on the change that deepened day by day; but I watched my wife furtively, with a concentration of attention that sometimes left me physically exhausted. I felt, too, at length, that I was growing morbid, that suspicion coloured my mind and caused me, perhaps, to put a wrong interpretation on many of her actions, to exaggerate and misconstrue the most simple things she did. I began to believe her every look premeditated. Even if she kissed me I thought she did it with a purpose, if she smiled up at me as of old I fancied the smile to be only a concealment of its opposite. By degrees we became shy of each other. We were like uncongenial intimates, forced to occupy the same house, forced into a fearful knowledge of each other's personal habits, while we knew nothing of the thoughts that make up the true lives of individuals.

And then another incident occurred, a pendant to the incident of Margot's strange denied visit to the room she affected to fear. It was one night, one deep dark night of the autumn—a season to affect even a cheerful mind and incline it towards melancholy. Margot and I were now often silent when we were together. That evening, towards nine, a dull steady rain set in. I remember I heard it on the window-panes as we sat in the drawing-room after dinner, and remarked on it, saying to her that if it continued for two or three days she might chance to see the floods out, and that fishermen would descend upon us by the score.

I did not obtain much response from her. The dreariness of the weather seemed to affect her spirits. She took up a book presently, and appeared to read; but once, in glancing up suddenly from my newspaper, I thought I caught her gaze fixed fearfully upon me. It seemed to me that she was looking furtively

at me with an absolute terror. I was so much affected that I made some excuse for leaving the room, went down to my den, lit a cigar, and walked uneasily up and down, listening to the rain on the window. At ten Margot came in to tell me she was going to bed. I wished her good-night tenderly, but as I held her slim body a moment in my arms I felt that she began to tremble. I let her go, and she slipped from the room with the soft, cushioned step that was habitual with her. And, strangely enough, my thoughts recurred to the day, long ago, when I first held the great white cat on my knees, and felt its body shrink from my touch with a nameless horror. The uneasy movement of the woman recalled to me so strongly and so strangely the uneasy movement of the animal.

I lit a second cigar. It was near midnight when it was smoked out, and I turned down the lamp and went softly up to bed. I undressed in the room adjoining my wife's and then stole into hers. She was sleeping in the wide white bed rather uneasily, and as I leaned over her, shading the candle flame with my outspread hand, she muttered some broken words that I could not catch. I had never heard her talk in her dreams before. I lay down gently at her side and extinguished the candle.

But sleep did not come to me. The dull, dead silence weighed upon instead of soothing me. My mind was painfully alive, in a ferment; and the contrast between my own excitement and the hushed peace of my environment was painful, was almost unbearable. I wished that a wind from the mountains were beating against the window-panes, and the rain lashing the house in fury. The black calm around was horrible, unnatural. The drizzling rain was now so small that I could not even hear its patter when I strained my ears. Margot had ceased to mutter, and lay perfectly still. How I longed to be able to read the soul hidden in her sleeping body, to unravel the mystery of the mind which I had once understood so perfectly! It is so horrible that we can never open the human envelope, take out the letter, and seize with our eyes upon its every word. Margot slept with all her secrets safe-guarded, although she was unconscious, no longer watchful, on the alert. She was so silent, even her quiet breathing not reaching my ear, that I felt impelled to stretch out my hand beneath the coverlet and touch hers ever so softly. I did so.

Her hand was instantly and silently withdrawn. She was awake, then.

"Margot," I said, "did I disturb you?"

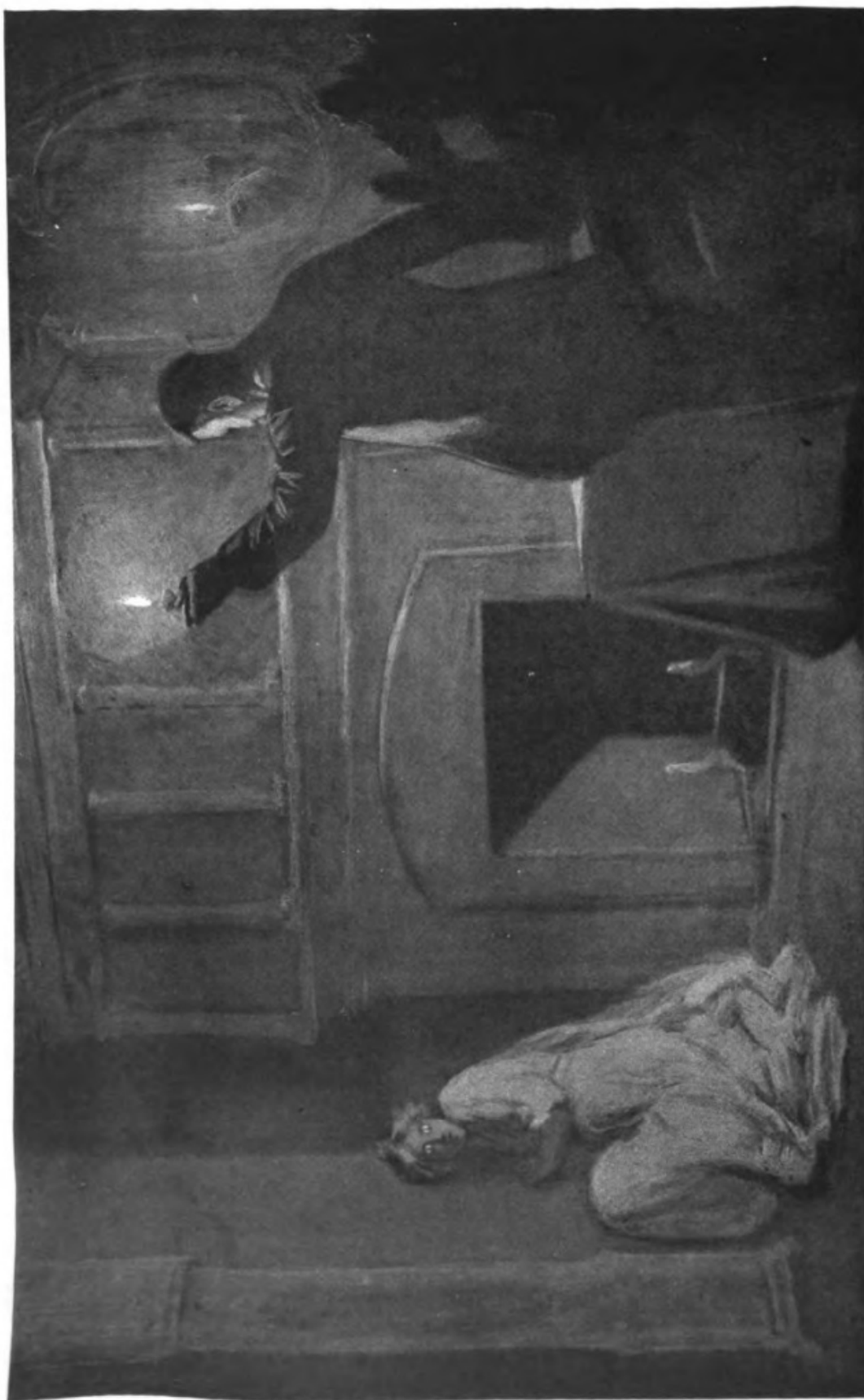
There was no answer.

The movement, followed by the silence, affected me very disagreeably.

I lit the candle and looked at her. She was lying on the extreme edge of the bed, with her blue eyes closed. Her lips were slightly parted. I could hear her steady breathing. Yet was she really sleeping?

I bent lower over her, and as I did so a slight, involuntary movement, akin to what we call a shudder, ran through her body. I recoiled from the bed. An impotent anger seized me. Could it be that my presence was becoming so hateful to my wife that even in sleep her body trembled when I drew near it? Or was this slumber feigned? I could not tell, but I felt it impossible at that moment to remain in the room. I returned to my own, dressed and descended the stairs to the door opening on to the terrace. I felt a longing to be out in the air. The atmosphere of the house was stifling.

Was it coming to this, then? Did I, a man, shrink with a fantastic cowardice from a woman I loved? The latent cruelty began to stir within me, the tyrant spirit which a strong love sometimes evokes. I had been Margot's slave almost. My affection had brought me to her feet, had kept me there. So long as she loved me I was content to be her captive, knowing she was mine. But a change in her



"The white thing was Margot."

attitude towards me might rouse the master. In my nature there was a certain brutality, a savagery, which I had never wholly slain, although Margot had softened me wonderfully by her softness, had brought me to gentleness by her tenderness. The boy of years ago had developed towards better things, but he was not dead in me. I felt that as I walked up and down the terrace through the night in a wild meditation. If my love could not hold Margot, my strength should.

I drew in a long breath of the wet night air, and I opened my shoulders as if shaking off an oppression. My passion for Margot had not yet drawn me down to weakness. It had raised me up to strength. The faint fear of her, which I had felt almost without knowing it more than once, died within me. The desire of the conqueror elevated me. There was something for me to win. My paralysis passed away, and I turned towards the house.

And now a strange thing happened. I walked into the dark hall, closed the outer door, shutting out the dull murmur of the night, and felt in my pocket for my matchbox. It was not there. I must inadvertently have laid it down in my dressing-room and left it. I searched about in the darkness on the hall table, but could find no light. There was nothing for it, then, but to feel my way upstairs as best I could.

I started, keeping my hand against the wall to guide me. I gained the top of the stairs, and began to traverse the landing, still with my hand upon the wall. To reach my dressing-room I had to pass the apartment which had been my grandmother's sitting-room.

When I reached it, instead of sliding along a closed door, as I had anticipated, my hand dropped into vacancy.

The door was wide open. It had been shut, like all the other doors in the house, when I had descended the stairs—shut and locked, as it always was at night-time. Why was it open now?

I paused in the darkness. And then an impulse seized me to walk forward into the room. I advanced a step; but, as I did so, a horrible low cry broke upon my ears out of the darkness. It came from immediately in front of me, and sounded like an expression of the most abject fear.

My feet rooted themselves to the ground.

"Who's there?" I asked.

There came no answer.

I listened for a moment, but did not hear the minutest sound. The desire for light was overpowering. I generally did my writing in this room, and knew the exact whereabouts of everything in it. I knew that on the writing-table there was a silver box containing wax matches. It lay on the left of my desk. I moved another step forward.

There was the sound of a slight rustle, as if some one shrank back as I advanced.

I laid my hand quickly on the box, opened it and struck a light. The room was vaguely illuminated. I saw something white at the far end, against the wall. I put the match to a candle.

The white thing was Margot. She was in her dressing-gown, and was crouched up in an angle of the wall as far away from where I stood as possible. Her blue eyes were wide open, and fixed upon me with an expression of such intense and hideous fear in them, that I almost cried out.

"Margot, what is the matter?" I said. "Are you ill?"

She made no reply. Her face terrified me.

"What is it, Margot?" I cried, in a loud, almost harsh voice, determined to rouse her from this horrible, unnatural silence. "What are you doing here?"

I moved towards her. I stretched out my hands and seized hers. As I did so a sort of sob burst from her. Her hands were cold and trembling.

"What is it? What has frightened you?" I reiterated.

At last she spoke in a low voice.

"You—you looked so strange, so—so cruel as you came in," she said.

"Strange! Cruel! But you could not see me. It was dark," I answered.

"Dark!" she said.

"Yes, until I lit the candle. And you cried out when I was only in the doorway. You could not see me there."

"Why not? What has that got to do with it?" she murmured, still trembling violently.

"You can see me in the dark?"

"Of course," she said. "I don't understand what you mean. Of course I can see you when you are there before my eyes."

"But——" I began; and then her obvious and complete surprise at my questions stopped them. I still held her hands in mine, and their extreme coldness roused me to the remembrance that she was unclothed.

"You will be ill if you stay here," I said. "Come back to your room."

She said nothing, and I led her back, waited while she got into bed, and then, placing the candle on the dressing-table, sat down in a chair by her side.

The strong determination to take prompt action, to come to an explanation, to end these dreary mysteries of mind and conduct, was still upon me.

I did not think of the strange hour; I did not care that the night was gliding on towards dawn. I was self-absorbed. I was beyond ordinary considerations.

Yet I did not speak immediately. I was trying to be quite calm, trying to think of the best line for me to take. So much might depend upon our mere words now. At length I said, laying my hand upon hers, which was outside the coverlet: "Margot, what were you doing in that room at such a strange hour? Why were you there?"

She hesitated obviously. Then she answered, not looking at me: "I missed you. I thought you might be there—writing."

"But you were in the dark."

"I thought you would have a light."

I knew by her manner that she was not telling me the truth, but I went on quietly: "If you expected me, why did you cry out when I came to the door?"

She tried to draw her hand away, but I held it fast, closing my fingers upon it with even cruel strength.

"Why did you cry out?"

"You—you looked so strange, so cruel."

"So cruel!"

"Yes. You frightened me—you frightened me horribly."

She began suddenly to sob, like one completely overstrained. I lifted her up in the bed, put my arms round her and made her lean against me. I was strangely moved.

"I frightened you! How can that be?" I said, trying to control a passion of mingled love and anger that filled my breast. "You know that I love you. You must know that. In all our short married life have I ever been even momentarily unkind to you? Let us be frank with one another. Our lives have changed lately. One of us has altered. You cannot say that it is I."

She only continued to sob bitterly in my arms. I held her closer.

"Let us be frank with one another," I went on. "For God's sake let us have

no barriers between us. Margot, look into my eyes and tell me—are you growing tired of me?”

She turned her head away, but I spoke more sternly: “You shall be truthful. I will have no more subterfuge. Look me in the face. You did love me once?”

“Yes, yes,” she whispered, in a choked voice.

“What have I done, then, to alienate you? Have I ever hurt you, ever shown a lack of sympathy, ever neglected you?”

“Never—never.”

“Yet you have changed to me since—since——” I paused a moment, trying to recall when I had first noticed her altered demeanour.

She interrupted me.

“It has all come upon me in this house,” she sobbed. “Oh! what is it? What does it all mean? If I could understand a little—only a little, it would not be so bad. But this nightmare, this thing that seems such a madness of the intellect——”

Her voice broke and ceased. Her tears burst forth afresh. Such mingled fear, passion, and a sort of strange latent irritation, I had never seen before.

“It is a madness indeed,” I said, and a sense almost of outrage made my voice hard and cold. “I have not deserved such treatment at your hands.”

“I will not yield to it,” she said, with a sort of desperation, suddenly throwing her arms round me. “I will not—I will not!”

I was strangely puzzled. I was torn with conflicting feelings. Love and anger grappled at my heart. But I only held her, and did not speak until she grew obviously calmer. The paroxysm seemed passing away. Then I said, “I cannot understand.”

“Nor I,” she answered, with a directness that had been foreign to her of late, but that was part and parcel of her real, beautiful nature. “I cannot understand. I only know there is a change in me, or in you to me, and that I cannot help it, or that I have not been able to help it. Sometimes I feel—do not be angry, I will try to tell you—a physical fear of you, of your touch, of your clasp, a fear such as an animal might feel towards the master who had beaten it. I tremble then at your approach. When you are near me I feel cold, oh! so cold and—and anxious, perhaps I ought to say apprehensive. Oh, I am hurting you!”

I suppose I must have winced at her words, and she is quick to observe.

“Go on,” I said: “do not spare me. Tell me everything. It is madness indeed; but we may kill it, when we both know it.”

“Oh, if we could!” she cried, with a poignancy which was heartbreaking to hear. “If we could!”

“Do you doubt our ability?” I said, trying to be patient and calm. “You are unreasoning, like all women. Be sensible for a moment. You do me a wrong in cherishing these feelings. I have the capacity for cruelty in me. I may have been—I have been cruel in the past, but never to you. You have no right to treat me as you have done lately. If you examine your feelings, and compare them with facts, you will see their absurdity.”

“But,” she interposed, with a woman’s fatal quickness, “that will not do away with their reality.”

“It must. Look into their faces until they fade like ghosts, seen only between light and darkness. They are founded upon nothing; they are bred without father or mother. They are hysterical. They are wicked. Think a little of me. You are not going to be conquered by a chimera, to allow a phantom created by your imagination to ruin the happiness that has been so beautiful. You will not do that! You dare not.”

She only answered, "If I can help it."

A passionate anger seized me, a fury at my impotence against this child. I pushed her almost roughly from my arms.

"And I have married this woman!" I cried bitterly. I got up.

Margot had ceased crying now, and her face was very white and calm. It looked rigid in the faint candle-light that shone across the bed.

"Do not be angry," she said. "We are controlled by something inside of us. There are powers in us that we cannot fight against."

"There is nothing we cannot fight against," I said passionately. "The doctrine of predestination is the devil's own doctrine. It is the doctrine set up by the sinner to excuse his sin. It is the coward's doctrine. Understand me, Margot: I love you, but I am not a weak fool. There must be an end of this folly. Perhaps you are playing with me, acting like a girl, testing me. Let us have no more of it."

She said, "I only do what I must."

Her tone turned me cold. Her set face frightened me, and angered me, for there was a curious obstinacy in it. I left the room abruptly, and did not return. That night I had no sleep.

I am not a coward, but I find that I am inclined to fear that which fears me. I dread an animal that always avoids me silently more than an animal that actually attacks me. The thing that runs from me makes me shiver, the thing that creeps away when I come near wakes my uneasiness. At this time there rose up in me a strange feeling towards Margot. The white, fair child I had married was at moments—only at moments—horrible to me. I felt disposed to shun her. Something within cried out against her. Long ago, at the instant of our introduction, an unreasoning sensation that could only be called dread had laid hold upon me. That dread returned from the night of our explanation, returned deepened and added to. It prompted me to a suggestion which I had no sooner made than I regretted it. On the morning following I told Margot that in future we had better occupy separate rooms. She assented quietly, but I thought a furtive expression of relief stole for a moment into her face.

I was deeply angered with her and with myself; yet, now that I knew beyond question my wife's physical terror of me, I was half afraid of her. I felt as if I could not bring myself to lie long hours by her side in the darkness, by the side of a woman who was shrinking from me, who was watching me when I could not see her. The idea made my very flesh creep.

Yet I hated myself for this shrinking of the body, and sometimes hated her for rousing it. A hideous struggle was going on within me—a struggle between love and impotent anger and despair, between the lover and the master. For I am one of the old-fashioned men who think that a husband ought to be master of his wife as well as of his house.

How could I be master of a woman I secretly feared? My knowledge of myself spurred me through acute irritation almost to the verge of madness.

All calm was gone. I was alternately gentle to my wife and almost ferocious towards her, ready to fall at her feet and worship her or to seize her and treat her with physical violence. I only restrained myself by an effort.

My variations of manner did not seem to affect her. Indeed, it sometimes struck me that she feared me more when I was kind to her than when I was harsh.

And I knew, by a thousand furtive indications, that her horror of me was deepening day by day. I believe she could hardly bring herself to be in a room alone with me, especially after nightfall.

One evening, when we were dining, the butler, after placing dessert upon the table,



"Springing up, she glided softly out of the room."

moved to leave us. She turned white, and as he reached the door half rose, and called him back in a sharp voice.

"Symonds!" she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You are going?"

The fellow looked surprised. "Can I get you anything, ma'am?"

She glanced at me with an indescribable uneasiness. Then she leaned back in her chair with an effort, and pressed her lips together.

"No," she said.

As the man went out and shut the door she looked at me again from under her eyelids; and finally her eyes travelled from me to a small, thin-bladed knife, used for cutting oranges, that lay near her plate, and fixed themselves on it. She put out her hand stealthily, drew it towards her, and kept her hand over it on the table. I took an orange from a dish in front of me.

"Margot," I said, "will you pass me that fruit knife?"

She obviously hesitated.

"Give me that knife," I repeated roughly, stretching out my hand.

She lifted her hand, left the knife upon the table, and at the same time, springing up, glided softly out of the room and closed the door behind her.

That evening I spent alone in the smoking-room, and, for the first time, she did not come to bid me good-night.

I sat smoking my cigar in a tumult of furious despair and love. The situation was becoming intolerable. It could not be endured. I longed for a crisis, even for a violent one. I could have cried aloud that night for a veritable tragedy. There were moments when I would almost have killed the child who mysteriously

eluded and defied me. I could have wreaked a cruel vengeance upon the body for the sin of the mind. I was terribly, mortally distressed.

After a long and painful self-communion, I resolved to make another wild effort to set things right before it was too late; and when the clock chimed the half-hour after ten I went upstairs softly to her bedroom and turned the handle of the door, meaning to enter, to catch Margot in my arms, tell her how deep my love for her was, how she injured me by her base fears, and how she was driving me back from the gentleness she had given me to the cruelty, to the brutality, of my first nature.

The door resisted me: it was locked.

I paused a moment, and then tapped gently. I heard a sudden rustle within, as if some one hurried across the floor away from the door, and then Margot's voice cried sharply:



"All the warmth in me froze up."

"Who's that? Who is there?"

"Margot, it is I. I wish to speak to you—to say good-night."

"Good-night," she said.

"But let me in for a moment."

There was a silence—it seemed to me a long one; then she answered: "Not now, dear: I—I am so tired."

"Open the door for a moment."

"I am very tired. Good-night."

The cold, level tone of her voice—for the anxiety had left it after that first sudden cry—roused me to a sudden fury of action. I seized the handle of the door and pressed with all my strength. Physically I am a very powerful man,—my anger and despair gave me a giant's might. I burst the lock and sprang into the room. My impulse was to seize Margot in my arms and crush her to death,

it might be, in an embrace she could not struggle against. The blood coursed like molten fire through my veins. The lust of love, the lust of murder even, perhaps, was upon me. I sprang impetuously into the room.

No candles were alight in it. The blinds were up, and the cold moonbeams filtered through the small lattice panes. By the farthest window, in the yellowish radiance, was huddled a white thing.

A sudden cold took hold upon me. All the warmth in me froze up.

I stopped where I was and held my breath.

That white thing, seen thus uncertainly, had no semblance to humanity. It was animal wholly. I could have believed for the moment that a white cat crouched from me there by the curtain, waiting to spring.

What a strange illusion that was! I tried to laugh at it afterwards, but at the moment horror stole through me, horror and almost awe.

All desire of violence left me. Heat was dead: I felt cold as stone. I could not even speak a word.

Suddenly the white thing moved. The curtain was drawn sharply; the moonlight was blotted out; the room was plunged in darkness—a darkness in which that thing could see!

I turned and stole out of the room. I could have fled, driven by the nameless fear that was upon me.

Only when the morning dawned did the man in me awake, and I cursed myself for my cowardice.

* * * * *

The following evening we were asked to dine out with some neighbours, who lived a few miles off in a wonderful old Norman castle near the sea. During the day neither of us had made the slightest allusion to the incidents of the previous night. We both felt it a relief to go into society, I think. The friends to whom we went—Lord and Lady Melchester—had a large party staying with them, and we were, I believe, the only outsiders who lived in the neighbourhood. One of their guests was Professor Black, whose name I have already mentioned—a little, dry, thin, acrid man, with thick black hair, innocent of the comb, and pursed, straight lips. I had met him two or three times in London, and as he had only just arrived at the castle and scarcely knew his fellow-visitors there, he brought his wine over to me when the ladies left the dining-room, and entered into conversation. At the moment I was glad, but before we followed the women I would have given a year—I might say years—of my life not to have spoken to him, not to have heard him speak that night.

How did we drift into that fatal conversation? I hardly remember. We talked first of the neighbourhood, then swayed away to books, then to people. Yes, that was how it came about. The Professor was speaking of a man whom we both knew in town, a curiously effeminate man, whose every thought and feeling seemed that of a woman. I said I disliked him, and condemned him for his woman's demeanour, his woman's mind; but the Professor thereupon joined issue with me.

"Pity the fellow if you like," he uttered, in his rather strident voice; "but as to condemning him I would as soon condemn a tadpole for not being a full-grown frog. His soul is beyond his power to manage, or even to coerce, you may depend upon it."

Having sipped his port, he drew a little nearer to me, and slightly dropped his voice.

"There would be less censure of individuals in this world," he said, "if people



"He drew a little nearer to me, and slightly dropped his voice."

were only a little more thoughtful. These souls are like letters, and sometimes they are sealed up in the wrong envelope. For instance, a man's soul may be put into a woman's body, or *vice versa*. It has been so in D——'s case. A mistake has been made.

"By Providence?" I interrupted, with, perhaps, just a *souffron* of sarcasm in my voice.

The Professor smiled.

"Suppose we imitate Thomas Hardy and say by the President of the Immortals, who makes sport with more humans than Tess," he answered. "Mistakes may be deliberate, just as their reverse may be accidental. Even a mighty power may condescend sometimes to a very practical joke. To a thinker the world is full of apple-pie beds, and cold wet sponges fall on us from at least half the doors we push open. The soul juggleries of the before-mentioned President are very curious, but people will not realise that soul transference from body to body is as much a plain fact as the daily rising of the sun on one half of the world and its nightly setting on the other."

"Do you mean that souls pass on into the world again on the death of the particular body in which they have been for the moment confined?" I asked.

"Precisely: I have no doubt of it. Sometimes a woman's soul goes into a man's body; then the man acts woman, and people cry against him for effeminacy. The soul colours the body with actions, the body does not colour the soul, or not in the same degree."

"But we are not irresponsible. We can command ourselves."

The Professor smiled dryly.

"You think so?" he said. "I sometimes doubt it."

"And I doubt your theory of soul transference."

"That shows me—pardon the apparent impertinence—that you have never really examined the soul question with any close attention. Do you suppose that D—— really likes being so noticeably different from other men? Depend upon it, he has noticed in himself what we have noticed in him. Depend upon it, he has tried to be ordinary, and found it impossible. His soul manages him as a strong nature manages a weak one, and his soul is a female, not a male. For souls have sexes, otherwise what would be the sense of talking about wedded souls? I have no doubt whatever of the truth of re-incarnation on earth. Souls go on and on following out their object of development."

"You believe that every soul is re-incarnated?"

"A certain number of times."

"That even in the animal world the soul of one animal passes into the body of another?"

"Wait a minute. Now we are coming to something that tends to prove my theory true. Animals have souls, as you imply. Who can know them intimately and doubt it for an instant? Souls as immortal—or as mortal—as ours. And their souls, too, pass on."

"Into other animals?"

"Possibly. And eventually, in the process of development, into human beings."

I laughed, perhaps a little rudely. "My dear Professor, I thought that old notion was quite exploded in these modern scientific days."

"I found my beliefs upon my own minute observations," he said rather frigidly. "I notice certain animals masquerading—to some extent—as human beings, and I draw my own conclusions. If they happen to fit in at all with the conclusions of

Pythagoras—or any one else, for that matter—well and good. If not, I am not much concerned. Surely you notice the animal—and not merely the animal, but definite animals—reproduced in man. There are men whose whole demeanour suggests the monkey. I have met women who in manner, appearance, and even character, were intensely like cats.”

I uttered a slight exclamation, which did not interrupt him.

“Now, I have made a minute study of cats. Of all animals they interest me the most. They have less apparent intensity, less uttered passion than dogs, but in my opinion more character. Their subtlety is extraordinary, their sensitiveness wonderful. Will you understand me when I say that all dogs are men, all cats women? That remark expresses the difference between them.”

He paused a moment.

“Go on—go on,” I said, leaning forward, with my eyes fixed upon his keen, puckered face.

He seemed pleased with my suddenly aroused interest.

“Cats are as subtle and as difficult to understand as the most complex woman, and almost as full of intuitions. If they have been well treated there is often a certain gracious, condescending suavity in their demeanour at first, even towards a total stranger, but if that stranger is ill disposed towards them they seem instinctively to read his soul, and they are in arms directly. Yet they dissemble their fears in a cold indifference and reserve. They do not take action, they merely abstain from action. They withdraw the soul that has peeped out, as they can withdraw their claws into the pads upon their feet. They do not show fight as a dog might, they do not become aggressive, nor do they whine and put their tails between their legs. They are simply on guard, watchful, mistrustful. Is not all this woman?”

“Possibly,” I answered, with a painful effort to assume indifference.

“A woman intuitively knows who is her friend and who is her enemy—so long, at least, as her heart is not engaged: then she runs wild, I allow. A woman—— But I need not pursue the parallel. Besides, perhaps it is scarcely to the point, for my object is not to bolster up an absurd contention that all women have the souls of cats. No; but I have met women so strangely like cats that their souls have, as I said before souls do, coloured their bodies in actions. They have had the very look of cats in their faces. They have moved like them. Their demeanour has been patently and strongly feline. Now, I see nothing ridiculous in the assumption that such women’s bodies may contain souls—in process of development, of course—that formerly were merely cat souls, but that are now gaining humanity gradually, are working their way upwards in the scale. After all, we are not so much above the animals, and in our lapses we often become merely animals. The soul retrogrades for the moment.”

He paused again and looked at me. I was biting my lips, and my glass of wine was untouched. He took my agitation as a compliment, I suppose, for he smiled and said, “Are you in process of conversion?”

I half shook my head. Then I said, with an effort, “It is a curious and interesting idea, of course. But there is much to explain. Now, I should like to ask you this. Do you—do you believe that a soul, if it passes on as you think, carries its memory with it, its memory of former loves and—and hates? Say that a cat’s soul goes to a woman’s body, and that the cat has been—has been—well, tortured—possibly killed, by some one—say some man, long ago, would the woman, meeting that man, remember and shrink from him?”

“That is a very interesting and curious problem, and one which I do not pretend to have solved. I can, therefore, only suggest what might be, what seems to me

reasonable. I do not believe that the woman would remember positively, but I think she might have an intuition about the man. Our intuitions are, perhaps, sometimes only the fragmentary recollections of our souls of what formerly happened to them when in other bodies. Why, otherwise, should we sometimes conceive an ardent dislike of some stranger—charming to all appearance—of whom we know no evil, whom we have never heard of, nor met, before? Intuitions, so called, are often only tattered memories. And these intuitions might, I should fancy, be strengthened, given body, robustness, by associations—of place, for example. Cats become intensely attached to localities, to certain spots, a particular house or garden, a particular fireside, apart from the people who may be there. Possibly, if the man and the woman of whom you speak could be brought together in the very place where the torture and death occurred, the dislike of the woman might deepen into positive hatred. It would, however, be always unreasoning hatred, I think, and even quite unaccountable to herself. Still——”

But here Lord Melchester rose from the table. The conversations broke into fragments. I felt that I was pale to the lips.

We passed into the drawing-room. The ladies were grouped together at one end, near the piano. Margot was among them. She was, as usual, dressed in white, and round the bottom of her gown there was an edging of snow-white fur. As we came in she moved away from the piano to a sofa at some distance, and sank down upon it. Professor Black, who had entered the room at my side, seized my arm gently.

“Now, that lady,” he whispered in my ear,—“I don’t know who she may be, but she is intensely cat-like. I observed it before dinner. Did you notice the way she moved just then, the soft, yielding, easy manner in which she sat down, falling at once, quite naturally, into a charming pose? And her china-blue eyes are——”

“She is my wife, Professor,” I interrupted harshly.

He looked decidedly taken aback.

“I beg your pardon; I had no idea. I did not enter the drawing-room to-night till after you arrived. I believed that lady was one of my fellow-guests in the house. Let me congratulate you. She is very beautiful.”

And then he mingled rather hastily in the group near the piano.

The man is mad, I know, mad as a hatter on one point, like so many clever men. He sees the animal in every person he meets just because his preposterous theory inclines him to do so. Having given in his adherence to it, he sees facts not as they are, but as he wishes them to be; but he shall not carry me with him. The theory is his, not mine. It does not hold water for a moment. I can laugh at it now, but that night I confess it did seize me for the time being. I could scarcely talk; I found myself watching Margot with a terrible intentness, and I found myself agreeing with the Professor to an extent that made me marvel at my own previous blindness.

There was something strangely feline about the girl I had married—the soft, white girl who was becoming terrible to me, dear though she still was and must always be. Her movements had the subtle, instinctive and certain grace of a cat’s. Her cushioned step, which had often struck me before, was like the step of a cat. And those china-blue eyes! A sudden cold seemed to pass over me as I understood why I had recognised them when I first met Margot. They were the eyes of the animal I had tortured, the animal I had killed. Yes, but that proved nothing, absolutely nothing. Many people had the eyes of animals—the soft eyes of dogs, the furtive, cruel eyes of tigers. I had known such people. I had even once had an affair with a girl who was always called the shot partridge, because her eyes were supposed to be like those of a dying bird. I tried to laugh to



"Now, that lady . . . is intensely cat-like."

myself as I remembered this. But I felt cold, and my senses seemed benumbed as by a great horror. I sat like a stone, with my eyes fixed upon Margot, trying painfully to read into her all that the words of Professor Black had suggested to me—trying, but with the wish not to succeed.

I was roused by Lady Melchester, who came towards me asking me to do something, I forget now what. I forced myself to be cheerful, to join in the conversation, to seem at my ease; but I felt like one oppressed with nightmare,

and I could scarcely withdraw my eyes from the sofa where my wife was sitting. She was talking now to Professor Black, who had just been introduced to her; and I felt a sudden fury in my heart as I thought that he was perhaps drily, coldly, studying her, little knowing what issues—far reaching, it might be, in their consequences—hung upon the truth or falsehood of his strange theory. They were talking earnestly, and presently it occurred to me that he might be imbuing Margot with his pernicious doctrines, that he might be giving her a knowledge of her own soul which now she lacked. The idea was insupportable. I broke off abruptly the conversation in which I was taking part, and hurried over to them with an impulse which must have astonished any one who took note of me. I sat down on a chair, drew it forward almost violently, and thrust myself in between them.

"What are you two talking about?" I said roughly, with a suspicious glance at Margot.

The Professor looked at me in surprise.

"I was instructing your wife in some of the mysteries of salmon fishing," he said. "She tells me you have a salmon river running through your grounds."

I laughed uneasily.

"So you are a fisherman as well as a romantic theorist!" I said, rather rudely. "How I wish I were as versatile! Come, Margot, we must be going now. The carriage ought to be here."

She rose quietly and bade the Professor good-night; but as she glanced up at me, in rising, I fancied I caught a new expression in her eyes. A ray of determination, of set purpose, mingled with the gloomy fire of their despair.

As soon as we were in the carriage I spoke, with a strained effort at ease and the haphazard tone which should mask furtive cross-examination.

"Professor Black is an interesting man," I said.

"Do you think so?" she answered from her dark corner.

"Surely. His intellect is really alive. Yet, with all his scientific knowledge and his power of eliciting facts and elucidating them, he is but a featherheaded man."

I paused, but she made no answer.

"Do you not think so?"

"How can I tell?" she replied. "We only talked about fishing. He managed to make that topic a pleasant one."

Her tone was frank. I felt relieved.

"He is exceedingly clever," I said heartily, and we relapsed into silence.

When we reached home, and Margot had removed her cloak, she came up to me and laid her hand on my arm.

So unaccustomed was her touch now that I was startled. She was looking at me with a curious, steady smile, an unwavering smile that chilled instead of warming me.

"Ronald," she said, "there has been a breach between us. I have been the cause of it. I should like to—to heal it. Do you still love me as you did?"

I did not answer immediately. I could not. Her voice, schooled as it was, seemed somehow at issue with the words she uttered. There was a desperate, hard note in it that accorded with that enigmatic smile of the mouth.

It roused a cold suspicion within me that I was close to a masked battery. I shrank physically from the touch of her hand.

She waited with her eyes upon me. Our faces were lit tremblingly by the flames of the two candles we held.

At last I found a voice. "Can you doubt it?" I asked.

She drew a step nearer. "Then let us resume our old relations," she said.

"Our old relations?"

"Yes."

I shuddered as if a phantom stole by me. I was seized with horror.

"To-night? It is not possible!"

"Why?" she said, still with that steady smile of the mouth.

"Because—because I don't know—I—— To-morrow it shall be as of old, Margot—to-morrow. I promise you."

"Very well. Kiss me, dear."

I forced myself to touch her lips with mine.

Which mouth was the colder?

Then, with that soft, stealthy step of hers, she vanished towards her room. I heard the door close gently.

I listened. The key was not turned in the lock.

This sudden abandonment by Margot of the fantastic precautions I had almost become accustomed to filled me with a nameless dread.

That night I fastened my door for the first time.

IV.

FRIDAY NIGHT,
November 6th.

I FASTENED my door, and when I went to bed lay awake for hours listening. A horror was upon me then which has not left me since for a moment, which may never leave me. I shivered with cold that night, the cold born of sheer physical terror. I knew that I was shut up in the house with a soul bent on unreasoning vengeance, the soul of the animal which I had killed prisoned in the body of the woman I had married. I was sick with fear then. I am sick with fear now.

To-night I am so tired. My eyes are heavy and my head aches. No wonder. I have not slept for three nights. I have not dared to sleep.

This strange revolution in my wife's conduct, this passionless change—for I felt instinctively that warm humanity had nothing to do with the transformation—took place three nights ago. These three last days Margot has been playing a part. With what object?

When I sat down to this grey record of two souls,—at once dreary and fantastic as it would seem, perhaps, to many,—I desired to reassure myself, to write myself into sweet reason, into peace.

I have tried to accomplish the impossible. I feel that the wildest theory may be the truest after all—that on the borderland of what seems madness, actuality paces.

Every remembrance of my mind confirms the truth first suggested to me by Professor Black.

I know Margot's object now.

The soul of the creature that I tortured, that I killed, has passed into the body of the woman whom I love; and that soul, which once slept in its new cage, is awake now, watching, plotting perhaps. Unconsciously to itself, it recognises me. It stares out upon me with eyes in which the dull terror deepens to hate; but it does not understand why it fears, why, in its fear, it hates. Intuition has taken the place of memory. The change of environment has killed recollection and has left instinct in its place.

Why did I ever sit down to write? The recalling of facts has set the seal upon my despair.

Instinct only woke in Margot when I brought her to the place the soul had known in the years when it looked out upon the world from the body of an animal.

That first day on the terrace instinct stirred in its sleep, opened its eyes, gazed forth upon me wonderingly, inquiringly.

Margot's faint remembrance of the terrace walk, of the flower-pots, of the grass borders where the cat had often stretched itself in the sun, her eagerness to see the chamber of death, her stealthy visits to that chamber, her growing uneasiness, deepening to acute apprehension, and finally to a deadly malignity—all lead me irresistibly to one conclusion.

The animal's soul within her no longer merely shrinks away in fear of me. It has grown sinister. It lies in ambush, full of a cold, a stealthy intention.

That curious, abrupt change in Margot's demeanour from avoidance to invitation marked the subtle, inward development of feeling, the silent passage from sensation only towards action.

Formerly she feared me. Now I must fear her.

The soul, crouching in its cage, shows its teeth. It is compassing my destruction.

The woman's body twitches with desire to avenge the death of the animal's.

I feel that it is only waiting the moment to spring; and the inherent love of life breeds in me a physical fear of it as of a subtle enemy. For even if the Soul is brave the body dreads to die, and seems at moments to possess a second Soul, purely physical, that cries out childishly against pain, against death.

Then, too, there is a cowardice of the imagination that can shake the strongest heart, and this resurrection from the dead, from the murdered, appals my imagination. That what I thought I had long since slain should have companioned me so closely when I knew it not!

I am sick with fear, physical and mental.

Two days ago, when I unlocked my bedroom door in the morning, and saw the autumn sunlight streaming in through the leaded panes of the hall windows, and heard the river dancing merrily down the gully among the trees that will soon be quite bare and naked, I said to myself, "You have been mad. Your mind has been filled with horrible dreams, that have transformed you into a coward and your wife into a demon. Put them away from you."

I looked across the gully. A clear, cold, thin light shone upon the distant mountains. The cloud stacks lay piled above the Scawfell range. The sky was a sheet of faded turquoise. I opened the window a moment. The air was dry and keen. How sweet it was to feel it on my face!

I went down to the breakfast-room. Margot was moving about it softly, awaiting me. In her white hands were letters. They dropped upon the table as she stole up to greet me. Her lips were set tightly together, but she lifted them to kiss me.

How close I came to my enemy as our mouths touched!

Her lips were colder than the wind.

Now that I was with her, my momentary sensation of acute relief deserted me. The horror that oppressed me returned.

I could not eat—I could only make a pretence of doing so; and my hand trembled so excessively that I could scarcely raise my cup from the table.

She noticed this, and gently asked me if I was ill.

I shook my head.



"How close I came to my enemy!"

When breakfast was over, she said in a low, level voice: "Ronald, have you thought over what I said last night?"

"Last night?" I answered, with an effort

"Yes, about the coldness between us. I think I have been unwell, unhappy, out of sorts. You know that—that women are more subject to moods than men, moods they cannot always account for even to themselves. I have hurt you lately, I know. I am sorry. I want you to forgive me, to—to—"

She paused a moment, and I heard her draw in her breath sharply.

"—to take me back into your heart again."

Every word, as she said it, sounded to me like a sinister threat, and the last sentence made my blood literally go cold in my veins.

I met her eyes. She did not withdraw hers. They looked into mine. They were the blue eyes of the cat which I had held upon my knees years ago. I had gazed into them as a boy, and watched the horror and the fear dawn in them with a malignant triumph.

"I have nothing to forgive," I said, in a broken, husky voice.

"You have much," she answered firmly. "But do not—pray do not bear malice."

"There is no malice in my heart—now," I said; and the words seemed like a cowardly plea for mercy to the victim of the past.

She lifted one of her soft white hands to my breast.

"Then it shall all be as it was before? And to-night you will come back to me?"

I hesitated, looking down. But how could I refuse? What excuse could I make for denying the request? Then I repeated mechanically: "To-night I will come back to you."

A terrible, slight smile travelled over her face. She turned and left me.

I sat down immediately. I felt too unnerved to remain standing. I was giving way utterly to an imaginative horror that seemed to threaten my reason. In vain I tried to pull myself together. My body was in a cold sweat. All mastery of my nerves seemed gone.

I do not know how long I remained there, but I was aroused by the entrance of the butler. He glanced towards me in some obvious surprise, and this astonishment of a servant acted upon me almost like a scourge. I sprang up hastily.

"Tell the groom to saddle the mare," I said. "I am going for a ride immediately."

Air, action, were what I needed to drive this stupor away. I must get away from this house of tears. I must be alone. I must wrestle with myself, regain my courage, kill the coward in me

I threw myself upon the mare, and rode out at a gallop towards the moors of Eskdale along the lonely country roads.

All day I rode, and all day I thought of that dark house, of that white creature awaiting my return, peering from the windows, perhaps, listening for my horse's hoofs on the gravel, keeping still the long vigil of vengeance.

My imagination sickened, fainted, as my wearied horse stumbled along the shadowy roads. My terror was too great now to be physical. It was a terror purely of the spirit, and indescribable.

To sleep with that white thing that waited me! To lie in the dark by it! To know that it was there, close to me!

If it killed me, what matter? It was to live and to be near it, with it, that appalled me.

The lights of the house gleamed out through the trees. I heard the sound of the river.

I got off my horse and walked furtively into the hall, looking round me.

Margot glided up to me immediately, and took my whip and hat from me with her soft, velvety white hands. I shivered at her touch.

At dinner her blue eyes watched me.

I could not eat, but I drank more wine than usual.

When I turned to go down to the smoking-room, she said: "Don't be very long, Ronald."

I muttered I scarcely know what words in reply. It was close on midnight before I went to bed. When I entered her room, shielding the light of the candle with my hand, she was still awake.

Nestling against the pillows, she stretched herself curiously and smiled up at me.

"I thought you were never coming, dear," she said.

I knew that I was very pale, but she did not remark it. I got into bed, but left the candle still burning.

Presently she said: "Why don't you put the candle out?"

I looked at her furtively. Her face seemed to me carved in stone, it was so rigid, so expressionless. She lay away from me at the extreme edge of the bed, sideways, with her hands towards me.

"Why don't you?" she repeated, with her blue eyes on me.

"I don't feel sleepy," I answered slowly.

"You never will while there is a light in the room," she said.

"You wish me to put it out?"

"Yes. How odd you are to-night, Ronald! Is anything the matter?"

"No," I answered, and I blew the light out.

How ghastly the darkness was!

I believed she meant to smother me in my sleep. I knew it. I determined to keep awake.

It was horrible to think that, as we lay there, she could see me all the time as if it were daylight.

The night wore on. She was quite silent and motionless. I lay listening.

It must have been towards morning when I closed my eyes, not because I was sleepy, but because I was so tired of gazing at blackness.

Soon after I had done this there was a stealthy movement in the bed.

"Margot, are you awake?" I instantly cried out sharply.

The movement immediately ceased. There was no reply.

When the light of dawn stole in at the window she seemed to be sleeping.

* * * * *

Last night I did not close my eyes once. She did not move.

She means to tire me out, and she has the strength to do it. To-night I feel so intensely heavy. Soon I must sleep, and then——

Shall I seek any longer to defend myself? Everything seems so inevitable, so beyond my power, like the working of an inexorable justice bent on visiting the sin of the father upon the child. For was not the cruel boy the father of the man?

And yet, is this tragedy inevitable? It cannot be. I will be a man. I will rise up and combat it. I will take Margot away from this house that her soul remembers, in which its body so long ago was tortured and slain, and she will—she must forget.

Instinct will sleep once more. It shall be so. I will have it so. I will strew poppies over her soul. I will take her far away from here, far away, to places where she will be once more as she has been.

To-morrow we will go. To-morrow——

* * * * *

Ah! That cry! Was it my own? I am suffocating! What was that? The horror of it! The pen has fallen from my hand. I must have slept; and I have dreamed. In my dream she stole upon me, that white thing! Her velvety hands were on my throat. The soul stared out from her eyes, the soul of the cat! Even her body, her woman's body, seemed to change at the moment of vengeance. She slowly strangled me, and as the breath died from me, and my failing eyes gazed at her, she was no longer woman at all, but something lithe and white and soft. Fur enveloped my throat. Those hands were claws. That breath on my face was the breath of an animal. The body had come back to companion the soul in its vengeance, the body of——

Ah! it was too horrible!

Can vengeance for the dead bring with it resurrection of the dead?

* * * * *

Hark! There is a voice calling to me from upstairs.

"Ronald, are you never coming? I am tired of waiting for you. Ronald!"

"Yes."

"Come to me!"

"And I must go."

* * * * *

Just at the glimmer of dawn the first pale shaft of the sun struck across a bed upon which lay the huddled and distorted corpse of a man. His head was sunk down in the disturbed pillows. His eyes, that could not see, stared towards the rising light. And from the open window of the chamber of death, into the sun and the free air, there sprang, with the lithe grace of a joyous wild animal, something white and soft and silent. A moment, and there was a gleam as of snowy fur in the sunshine. It flashed through the quivering air and was gone.

ROBERT S. HICHENS.



"His head was sunk down in the disturbed pillows."